

The Mexican American Archival Enterprise: Assessing the Legacy of the Benson

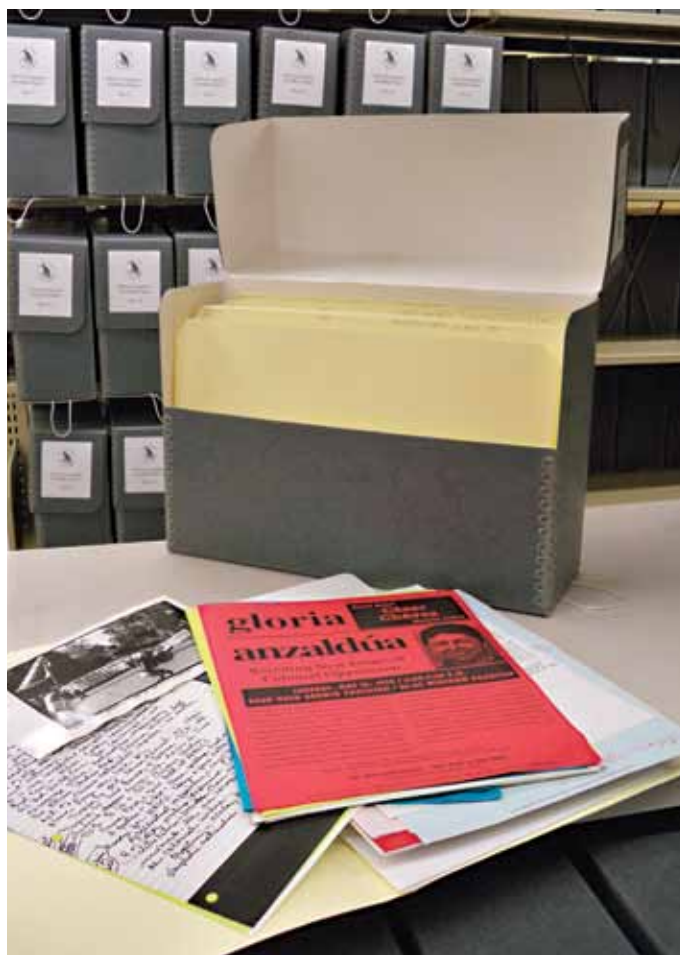
by VALERIE MARTINEZ and DAVID VILLARREAL

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AMÉRICO PAREDES. The League of United Latin American Citizens. Emma Tenayuca. César Chávez. José Ángel Gutiérrez. Gloria Anzaldúa. To students, scholars, and community members familiar with Mexican American history, these

names invoke a timeless spirit of intellectual and political activism that galvanized the fight for social progress on behalf of the Latino/a community over the past century. We find their stories of struggle, pain, hope, and endurance in several rich archival holdings located throughout the United States, but we are also fortunate that many of these invaluable histories have been collected and preserved right here in Austin within the Mexican American and Latino/a Collection housed at the University of Texas's Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection.

In 1974, the Mexican American Graduate Association sought to establish a new archival collection on the University of Texas campus that would document the rich heritage and vast historical experiences of Mexican Americans. With the assistance and support of community organizations, the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS), and the Benson Collection, the association succeeded in creating the Mexican American Library Program (MALP) with financial support provided by the University of Texas General Libraries.¹ In time, MALP would be renamed the Mexican American and Latino/a Collection in recognition of its expanding reach into the fuller range of Latino histories found throughout the United States and abroad. Today, the collection endeavors to build upon the initial repository created nearly four decades ago by continuing to acquire and preserve the necessary archival material needed for students, scholars, and community members to develop and advance the growing intellectual fields of Borderlands, Latino/a, and Mexican American Studies.



From the Gloria Anzaldúa Archive.



Since its inception, the Benson has collected an estimated 20,000 books and journals, well over 70 manuscript collections, and approximately 2,500 reels of microfilm to document the experience of Mexican Americans and Latinos. In addition to correspondence and personal papers, the library has collected artwork, ephemera, posters, photographs, and audiovisual recordings to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the past.² In keeping with the tradition of the early graduate students who founded MALP, we as history graduate students affiliated with the Center for Mexican American Studies conceived of a national conference that would provide a retrospective examination and assessment of these invaluable collections with the goal of creating a space for critical dialogue about the archive's future development.

In collaboration with the faculty and staff of CMAS and the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies and the Benson Collection (LLILAS Benson), we invited scholars who had utilized the Benson's collections in their published scholarship to assess the archive's role within the fields of history, education, literature, and media and cultural arts.³ This interdisciplinary conference showcased how various collections such as the nineteenth-century writings of Catarino Garza and the twentieth-century papers of George I. Sánchez and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) influenced and shaped the historical literature about Mexican Americans. For instance, the expansive VOCES Oral History Project has helped to correct the historical record that has largely discounted the extensive role played by Latinos and Latinas within several theaters of war including World War II and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Further, we are only now beginning to see the significance behind the recent archival additions of Chicana feminist papers to the Benson including the personal manuscript collection of Gloria Anzaldúa as well as the early papers of Austin-native and civil rights activist Martha Cotera. These two manuscript collections represent a growing strength of the Benson's holdings that help illuminate our understanding of women in the Chicano movement and beyond. Within the realm of media and cultural arts, the recently acquired Sam Coronado art collection also holds great importance in the way we view Chicano art and its significance to Chicano identity construction and community building. These materials are among the priceless artifacts, documents, and cultural pieces that one can find within the Mexican American and Latino/a Collection at the Benson.⁴

A Brief Survey of the Collections

While the Benson now houses many collections of diverse importance for the study of Mexican Americans and Latinos in the Americas, the conference highlighted a select number of collections that have made significant contributions to a variety of disciplinary

fields. The scholars who presented their work at the conference represent only a small fraction of the numerous scholars who have used the Benson holdings to advance our understanding of Mexican Americans and Latinos throughout multiple fields of study across a range of disciplines.

For example, students and scholars interested in researching the international politics and social history of the nineteenth-century U.S.-Mexico border will find the Catarino Garza Manuscript (1859–1895) particularly helpful. Born Catarino Erasmo Garza Rodríguez on November 25, 1859, near Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, he wrote an autobiography titled, “La lógica de los hechos: O sean observaciones sobre las circunstancias de los mexicanos en Texas, desde el año de 1877 hasta 1889.”⁵ In this 431-page uncompleted manuscript that remains unpublished, Garza detailed his experience as a recent Mexican immigrant in Texas that highlighted the racial strife and violence but also the cooperation that existed between Anglo Americans, Mexican Americans, and Mexican nationals.⁶ Ana-

lyzing the autobiography through a gendered lens also has allowed historian Elliott Young to interpret various constructions of masculinity along the border, including how Garza applied nineteenth-century understandings of gender roles to the concurrent struggles over property, territory, and cultural superiority throughout the region.⁷

Scholars such as Cynthia Orozco and Gabriela Gonzalez also have utilized gendered methodological approaches in their recent examinations of the LULAC papers. In her work *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, Orozco offers a nuanced

approach that incorporates an analysis of “masculinities, genders, and homosocialities,” to understand the relationship between women and men within the organization from women's positions as nonmembers and auxiliaries to their eventual integration into the organization as full members.⁸ In her upcoming publication, *Redeeming La Raza*, scholar Gabriela Gonzalez traces the intellectual development of political thought and consciousness among the wider membership base that includes women.⁹ These newer works have built upon even earlier generations of scholars who first utilized the Benson archives to build the foundational works for later Mexican American scholarship. These scholars include individuals like Mario T. García, who utilized the Benson archives to construct his seminal study of the Mexican American generation titled *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960* that has provided future generations of scholars with a useful generational framework for understanding both traditional and enduring time periods of Mexican American history. Through these works, we can see how generations of scholars like García, Gonzalez, and Orozco have utilized similar archival material at the Benson to arrive at completely different research projects. Their scholarship demonstrates the capacity of the Benson's archival holdings to produce even more cutting-edge scholarship.

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Among the most important of the Benson's recent acquisitions have been the papers of the late Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose pathbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* revolutionized Borderlands Studies. Anzaldúa utilizes the methodological construct of *autohistoria*, which incorporates her autobiography as an evidentiary base, in order to deconstruct the multiple dimensions of borderland identities; yet the increasingly growing literature on Anzaldúa has still to reconcile the unpublished details of her life with her own formal self-representation delivered through her abundant writings. For instance, in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, she describes the Chicano movement as the pivotal turning point in her life when she learned to embrace her Chicana heritage.¹⁰ Her papers, however, reveal a more nuanced personal experience through her diary entries and handwritten letters to her sister and mother that reveal a young woman studying at UT who actively questioned her place within a rapidly changing world.¹¹ The intimate details of Anzaldúa's life can be traced through her own everyday ephemera as well as published and as yet unpublished writings, which she actively collected until her death and that form the basis of her collection.

Beyond Anzaldúa, the Benson holds an impressive and growing array of sources about Mexican American and Latina women. Martha Cotera, who played a pivotal role in developing MALP by organizing the acquisition of important collections,

transferred a portion of her own papers covering her early years of Chicana activism to the library. Cotera's contribution has aided scholars by further adding nuance to our understanding of the Chicano movement.¹² In her study *¡Chicana Power!*, scholar Maylei Blackwell provides the first full-length analysis of the developing political consciousness of Chicanas during the *movimiento* as they strove to assert their autonomy in the midst of sexual and gender stratification.¹³ The Benson's holding of oral histories and personal papers on Chicanas during the Chicano movement reinforce the need for additional research on the significance of women on the gendered and "sexual politics of the movement."¹⁴

Finally, the recent addition of the Sam Coronado Papers (1970–2008) illustrates the merging of community activism and intellectual scholarship with the process of archive building. At the closing panel for media and cultural arts, art history graduate student Tatiana Reinoza described the importance of "working in alignment with marginalized and underrepresented communities" as a "valid practice from which to build new scholarship."¹⁵ In this spirit, Reinoza helped convince the Austin-based Latino artist and printmaker Sam Coronado to donate the organizational papers associated with his Serie Project to the Benson. These papers tell the story behind the project that pairs little-known Latino and other underrepresented artists with master printers to create limited-edition fine art prints.

In this sense, we can see the tradition of the 1970s generation of Mexican American graduate students who created MALP continue to this day with the culmination of this conference and through the efforts of activist-scholars who continue to advance archival development in order to produce future scholarship about the Mexican American and Latino past and present. ☀

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Notes

1. At the national conference held April 18–19, 2013, at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, Dr. Emilio Zamora (UT Department of History) gave the keynote address that provided a historical overview of the circumstances that gave rise to the call for a Mexican American archive on the UT campus. These pioneering graduate students, who were led by Andrés Tijerina, came from various professional disciplinary areas across campus as well as from the larger Austin community.
2. <http://wiki.lib.utexas.edu/mals/pmwiki.php/Main/HomePage>
3. The conference presenters covered five thematic areas including history, literature, the Chicano movement, education, and media and cultural arts, followed by a public reading given by the poetic collective Canto Mundo. These individuals include the following: Valerie Martinez, UT Austin (History Chair); Gabriela Gonzalez, University of Texas at San Antonio, "Digging through the Past: What I Learned about Civil Rights Activism from the Benson Mexican American Collections"; Mónica Muñoz-Martínez, UT Austin, "Searching for Gendered Perspectives at the Benson: A Historical Appraisal of the Latin American Collection"; Elliott Young, Lewis & Clark College, "Catarino Garza's Writings: A Late Nineteenth Century Texas Mexican Journalist, Intellectual and Revolutionary"; Irene Garza, UT Austin (Literature Chair); Norma E. Cantú, University of Missouri–Kansas City, "Finding Gloria: The Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Archive at the Benson Collection"; John Morán Gonzalez, UT Austin, "Of Archives and Borders: Reflections on Researching Mexican American Literature at the Benson Latin American Collection"; David Villarreal, UT Austin (Chicano Movement Roundtable Chair); Martha Cotera, Librarian, Austin, "Archive



Dean Randy Diehl gives opening remarks at the conference in the Benson.



The Kiss, ©2012; hand-painted screen print by Sam Z. Coronado, from the archives of WWII Oral History Project, UT Austin, Maggie Rivas, PhD.



From *LULAC News*, November–December 1973, vol. 35, no. 12.

Fever”; Ignacio García, Brigham Young University, “El Movimiento: Assessing and Expanding Research Themes in Chicano History”; Mario T. García, University of California, Santa Barbara, “The Mexican American Generation and the Chicano Movement: My Personal Research Journey and Its Implications for Archiving the Chicano Movement”; Jamie Puente, UT Austin (Education Chair); Maylei Blackwell, University of California, Los Angeles, “Archival Activism and the Politics of Chicana/o Print and Digital Communities”; Carlos Blanton, Texas A&M University–College Station, “Discovering Integration: One Scholar’s Journey in Researching Chicana/o Education at the Benson Latin American Collection”; Anita Tijerina Revilla, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, “What Happens in Vegas, Does NOT Stay in Vegas: Anzaldúistas in Sin City”; Tatiana Reinoza, UT Austin (Media and Cultural Arts Chair); Robb Hernandez, University of California, Riverside, “Object Encounters: Curatorial Dissonances in the Chicano Archive”; Claudia Zapata, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, “Exhibiting Archives: The Mexican American and

Latin@ Collections on Display”; Canto Mundo Public Reading, “Making a Space for Poetry: CantoMundo Archives at the Benson Library,” Deborah Paredez, UT Austin; Celeste Guzmán Mendoza, UT Austin; Norma E. Cantú; Carmen Tafolla, Poet Laureate of San Antonio, Texas.
4. To view a complete listing of the manuscript collections available, visit http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/archives/ma_manuscripts.html. For podcasts and audio files, <http://wiki.lib.utexas.edu/mals/pmwiki.php/Main/PodcastsAndAudioFiles>. For images, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/students/find/findimage.html>.
5. Catarino Garza Manuscript, “La Lógica de los Hechos,” Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas General Libraries, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter Benson Collection); Elliott Young, “Catarino Garza’s Writings: A Late Nineteenth Century Texas Mexican Journalist, Intellectual and Revolutionary” (paper presented at the *Mexican American Archival Enterprise: An Historical Appraisal*, Austin, Texas, April 18–19, 2013).
6. Catarino Garza, “La Lógica de los Hechos,” Benson Collection.

7. Elliott Young, “Catarino Garza’s Writings.”
8. Cynthia Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 8.
9. Gabriela Gonzalez, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
10. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 43.
11. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Diary Entries, 1971, Box 1.8*, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa Papers, Benson Collection.
12. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).
13. Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
14. *Ibid.*, 4.
15. Tatiana Reinoza, “Cultural Arts and Media Panel: Opening Remarks” (Paper presented at the *Mexican American Archival Enterprise: An Historical Appraisal*, Austin, Texas, April 18–19, 2013).